"It's about finding a way"[1]: Children, sites of opportunity, and building everyday peace in Colombia

Abstract

The multiple forms of violence associated with protracted conflict disproportionately affect young people. Literature on conflict-affected children often focuses on the need to provide stability and security through institutions such as schools but rarely considers how young people themselves see these sites as part of their everyday lives. The enduring, pervasive, and complex nature of Colombia's conflict means many young Colombians face the challenges of poverty, persistent social exclusion, and violence. Such conditions are exacerbated in 'informal' *barrio* communities such as los Altos de Cazucá, just south of the capital Bogotá. Drawing on field research in this community, particularly through interviews conducted with young people aged 11 to 17 in the this community, this article explores how young people themselves understand the roles of the local school and NGO in their personal conceptualisations of the violence in their everyday lives. The evidence indicates that children use spaces available to them opportunistically and that these actions can and should be read as contributing to local, everyday forms of peacebuilding. The ways in which institutional spaces are understood and used by young people as 'sites of opportunity' challenges the assumed illegitimacy of young people's voices and experiences in these environments.

Keywords: Colombia, children, violence, peacebuilding, education, everyday peace.

[1] Christian (not his real name), a 16 year old young man from the community of los Altos de Cazucá, in interview, November 2010.

Introduction

Colombia's protracted conflict between the national government and leftist guerrillas the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) has had significant consequences for many Colombians who have lived with violence and insecurity for decades. As of late 2012 a peace process is underway at the national level with the government and the FARC holding talks in Havana, Cuba. Popular opinion is divided on the likely success of the talks, and there have been criticisms of the distance of the peace talks from everyday life and the concerns of those living in areas most affected by conflict. A formal peace agreement would require ending the conflict, agrarian reform, potential participation of former guerrillas in politics, addressing victims' rights, and the cessation of FARC involvement in the drug trade ('Acuerdo General', August 2012). However, the definition of peace at a local level is more often understood as a better quality of life, increased security, and more opportunities for work and development (see Moser 2005). As a result, while peace negotiations at an elite level might secure a cessation of hostilities and are a crucial aspect of building peace in the country to change the relationship of the general population with violence and peace requires additional, different kinds of engagements at a local level with those most often excluded from broader discourses.

For many young people, whether fleeing direct violence or coping with socio-economic marginalisation, the conflict has caused incalculable trauma and risk. Yet these should not be totalising narratives of young people's experiences. Despite insecurity and violence, young people are competent and proactive in finding ways of responding to and navigating difficult everyday environments.. In situations where young people's lives have been profoundly affected by violence and conflict these spaces and relationships form an important component

of young people's lives and contributes to their sense-making and their participation in articulations of peacebuilding and the future. However, studies that examine the structural dynamics of conflict resolution and peace-building generally refer to young people as mere objects or referents within the social situations in which they are embedded. This article, in contrast, challenges a reductive, passive view of youth by centring children's accounts to focus not on the structures but on how those structures are understood and used by young people themselves in everyday practices. Drawing on research conducted with young people aged between 10 and 17 in the second half of 2010 in the informal *barrio* community of los Altos de Cazucá on Bogotá's outskirts, I explore young people's articulations of violence and insecurities in their everyday lives as well as the way institutional spaces such as the school and a local NGO function as sites of opportunity that young people can use to respond to violence and engage with constructive, contributory efforts to foster peace. Children use sites that are available to them to build resilience and envision their participation in their community. Specifically, I focus not on the structures *per se* but rather on young people's accounts of how they understand and use them in their daily lives.

I first contextualise the experiences of children in Cazucá[2] through a brief account of the main effects of the conflict on their lives and a description of some of the primary mechanisms, legislation, and programs that shape how children are understood and constructed by the state. I will then discuss the idea of local peacebuilding with reference to Galtung's (1996) notion of 'conflict transformation' and the work of Lederach (1995) and Kent and Barnett (2012) on participatory, local-led peacebuilding. This will serve as a framework for engaging with the experiences of young people themselves—seeing them as

[2] Amongst those who live and work there, the community of los Altos de Cazucá is known generally as simply Cazucá, and this shortened form of the name will also be used throughout this paper.

an important component of fostering an *everyday peace amongst violence*[3] in this community. Finally, the conversations I had with young people themselves about the sites of opportunity they identify in the community are discussed to illustrate the value of thinking more inclusively about peacebuilding, thinking about how young people engage with institutions and structures to produce everyday peace. Accounting for this opens new ways of understanding how children can participate in building local peace using those sites and structures that are available to them.

Children in Colombia

Consequences for Children of Half a Century of Conflict

The conflict in Colombia has been ongoing since the mid 1960s. Commencing as an ideologically driven struggle by leftist guerrillas the FARC against the state, it has evolved and deteriorated to a conflict tied to and financed by the illegal economy of drug trafficking and kidnapping and consisting of a complex range of actors[4]. There have been multiple unsuccessful peace talks and several periods of escalated military activity in an attempt to end the conflict. Fought largely in rural areas, the consequences have been significant for those who live in these regions and are faced with forced displacements and threats of violence against individuals. Meertens and Zambrano (2010) argue that threats against people are a tactic to appropriate arable or useful land. Rape and sexual violence are also used deliberately as tools of war against the bodies of women and girls; almost non-existent prosecution for these acts fosters an air of impunity (Alzate, 2007; Meertens 2010). For

[3] This understanding of a localised, everyday peace is outlined in detail in previous work (see Berents 2013) and draws in particular from the work of Oliver Richmond (see, amongst others: 2009, 2011)

[4] On Colombia's conflict see, amongst many others: Palacios 2006, Bushnell 1996, and Richani 2002, and the volume edited by Bouvier 2009.

young people recruitment by armed groups is one of the most significant threats. While there are no reliable statistics estimates of children involved in armed groups have ranged from 5,000 to 18,000 (Watchlist 2012; El Tiempo 2012). As combatants young people are used for active combat as well as messengers, camp staff and as 'girlfriends' for senior members (a role which often involves forced sexual encounters) (UN, 2012). Attempts to leave can result in torture or death. Conflict affected areas in Colombia also see the reduction or cessation of public services, as well as inadequate health and education facilities and staff, and the loss of livelihoods.

Young people and their families are often forced to flee conflict-affected areas, but this displacement carries its own risks and challenges. There are over 400,000 refugees living outside the borders of Colombia, and between 3.9 and 5.2 million internally displaced people (IDPs) have moved within the country (UNHCR 2012; CODHES 2010)[5]. Often these individuals and families end up on the urban periphery in illegal and unplanned *barrio* communities such as Cazucá. Again, young people feature significantly in these discussions as just over 50 percent of IDPs are under 18 years old (Guerrero 2008: 55). Access to education and health care remain significant obstacles for IDP children and their families. COALICO (Coalición Contra la Vinculación de Niños Niñas y Jóvenes al Conflicto Armado en Colombia) notes that conflict, displacement, and associated poverty interrupts many young people's schooling with seventy percent of children who have been displaced dropping out of school—either for economic reasons (even if the place in school is free, they cannot afford the uniform or need to work to support their family) or because they are not registered with

[5] Estimates of the IDP population vary from source to source, with the Colombian government citing the lower figure and NGOs and the UNHCR citing higher figures. Uncertainty of the actual figure is due to a range of reasons, including the fact that many people forcibly displaced do not register through the government programs.

the government program (COALICO 2005; see also HRW 2005: 41-46)[6]. Health systems in Colombia are overburdened and often people are unable to access healthcare they need due to long travel distances, impossibly long queues, and lack of appropriate identification.

In an effort to protect IDPs Law 387 was passed in 1997 recognising the legal legitimacy of IDPs and affirming their right to government assistance. However, in 2008 the Colombian Constitutional Court found that the rights of IDP children were still not being met. In particular IDP children still faced particular risk to physical security, hunger, preventable health problems, psychological trauma and inadequate access and support for education (Corte Constitucional Auto No. 251, 2008).

Formal Mechanisms: Rights and Education

While many young people are profoundly affected by the conflict and associated violence and marginalisation, there are multiple efforts at various levels to provide both support and structures that are aimed at improving their rights and opportunities. There is a range of formal mechanisms and processes designed to support and affirm children's rights and skills. The Colombian Constitution, rewritten in 1991, prioritises the rights of children "over the rights of others" (Article 44). Article 44 also lists other basic rights, including the right to physical integrity, health, instruction and culture, as well as the right to have a family and remain with that family, care and love, and the ability to freely express their opinions. The inclusion of these rights echoes those granted by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified in 1989). However, many young people in Colombia do not in reality experience many of these rights.

[6] In 2011 President Santos announced the creation of a fund to subsidise education places for supposedly 8.6 million Colombian students so they could access entirely free education for primary and secondary schooling (El Espectador 2011; Colombia Reports 2012).

In 2004, in an effort to strengthen the connection between rights and citizenship the National Program of Citizenship Competencies was launched by the Colombian Ministry of Education. While there is no universal curriculum in Colombia, the National Program is promoted to schools throughout the country to advance quality education on the basis of citizenship values, and to help address cycles of violence at multiple levels (from school-yard bullying to armed conflict). The program is focused on three related areas: *convivencia*[7] and peace, democratic participation, and diversity and respect (see Chaux, Lleras and Velasquez, 2004; Chaux and Velasquez 2009). The *Aulas en Paz* (Classrooms in Peace) initiative is directly promoted through the National Program and is designed to strengthen training of teachers, support of parents and peace education for children (Chaux, 2009). The National Program has also influenced other organisations including the Red Cross' School Brigades with an emphasis on community service; and *Escuelas Nuevas* (New Schools) where students in rural areas work from booklets at their own pace guided by a teacher, allowing them to study flexibly around harvests and to encourage peer learning[8]. Colombia in fact has a long history of pedagogical innovation and creative risk-taking, largely due to the long running conflict requiring teachers and other educators to find new solutions to foster spaces in which young people can achieve individual potential, but also learn the skills necessary for a more peaceful country. These types of programs exemplify educative structures that facilitate children's agency in countering the effects of violent conflict and social exclusion.

[7] This word does not have a direct translation into English. It broadly means coexistence, or peaceful interaction. While it has a particular place in the Citizenship Competencies program it is also used in general conversation.

[8] While review of *Aulas en Paz* has indicated it is highly successful (Ramos, Nieto and Chaux 2007), and *Escuelas Nuevas* has shown that students demonstrate more peaceful behaviour as well as improved academic outcomes (McEwan 1998; Forero, Escobar and Molina 2006), many of the smaller programmes are not formally reviewed. Yet the argument that improving and broadening pedagogical tools and interactions improves positive and peaceful outcomes has wide support.

The Case Study

Los Altos de Cazucá

Field research[9] for this study was undertaken from September to December 2010 in the informal community los Altos de Cazucá, which is located in the municipality of Soacha in the Department of Cundanimarca, Colombia. Soacha is just south of Bogotá, Colombia's capital, although rapid urbanization and the growth of informal *barrios*, or shantytown communities, such as Cazucá have made the division between Soacha and Bogotá almost impossible to distinguish. It is one of the poorest areas in the country, and its poverty and marginalisation is immediately visible in its lack of paved roads, the ad-hoc construction methods of housing, presence of refuse, tangles of electricity lines, and general absence of curated public space. People have been fleeing the broader conflict to this area since the 1970s. Soacha generally, and the community of Cazucá in particular, is one of the highest recipient-communities of internally displaced people in Colombia (MSF 2005). Data from CODHES (Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento) from 1999 to 2011 indicates that just over 37,000 displaced people have arrived in Soacha (CODHES, 2013: 92). Specifying a number can be problematic, however, as many people do not report themselves as displaced due to stigma and fear.

Due to their illegality, settlements like Cazucá are not been able to secure full and ongoing public services such as sewage, electricity, and potable water. Despite recognition by the municipality of these issues, the key program launched by the local government in response, *Familias en Accion* (Families in Action), has only been able to reach a limited number of people (Alcaldia Municipial de Soacha 2008:11). Other problems facing the

[9] Ethical clearance for this project was obtained from the University of Queensland's Behavioural and Social Science Review Board on the 1st September 2010.

community include poverty and un- or under- employment. Sixty seven percent of the population lives below the poverty line, while almost three quarters work in the informal economic sector (COHDES 2013: 93). Many people in Cazucá do not earn enough to provide sufficient food for themselves and their families. Although programs exist to assist people who are displaced or living in poverty, many people do not access such benefits either because they are unaware of them or because they fear registering will expose them to the armed groups from whom they have fled (MSF 2005: 2-3; Guerrero 2008). Access to healthcare and education are also key issues facing many in the community. Compounding these difficulties are the high levels of insecurity and violence that underpin life in the community. Various armed groups, often associated with the broader conflict, and other more local criminal groups known as *pandillas*, control much of the territory of the community and enforce compliance through death threats, violence, murders, and extortion. Young people are often at risk of recruitment to these groups or particularly vulnerable to violence through their daily movements through the community.

Research Process

My research in Cazucá was facilitated through the organisation *Fundación Pies Descalzos* (Barefoot Foundation, referred to in this article as the *fundación*), an NGO founded by Colombian singer Shakira Mubarak whose objective is to provide and support education initiatives to 'vulnerable' children across Colombia. In particular the *fundación* focuses on early childhood education, nutritional programs, and fostering communities around education to support children (Fundación Pies Descalzos 2011a, 2011b). In Cazucá, the *fundación* deploys its programs with and through a local school with two sites in the community. This involved, among other efforts: financial support for hot lunches, organisation of community events, running after-school homework programs, and outreach programs to parents and guardians.

One of the primary aims of the research was to find a way of engaging with young people and to listen to them talk about their own understandings and experiences of violence and peace. This initially involved participant observation as a volunteer with the *fundación*, assisting in classes at the school, spending time with the young people during their breaks and speaking with various teachers and other staff. Once established in the community I conducted semi-structured interviews with 28 students (17 female and 11 male) between the ages of 10 and 17[10]. These interviews were complemented by interviews and informal conversations with teachers, FPD staff and parents. Research, as Alldred and Burman note, tends to "mop up or ignore the messiness of peoples' accounts" (2005: 181). The need to insert other people's words and stories into a research frame involves processes of power and decision making which often is not remarked upon. When speaking of and with young people in structurally vulnerable positions, and with a desire to find ways of recognising their narratives as valid even as they contradict or complicate dominant narratives, paying attention to and acknowledging this 'messiness' is crucial.

Thinking about Peace Amidst Violence

Understandings of both children and the states of violence and peace are often reductive and consequently lacking an analysis of young people's agency or their engagement with violence or peace. In discourses concerning conflict and peacebuilding, children often become polarised as either passive victims or dangerous delinquents. Reality is more complex and nuanced, however, and the experiences of young people cannot be easily reduced to a binary of victim/delinquent. In contrast to the notion that conflict-affected young

[10] Pseudonyms are used for all young people quoted in this article. Use of pseudonyms is a way to overcome the problem of children wishing their individual contributions to be acknowledged but needing to remain unidentifiable for their safety (see Fine and Sandstrom 1988).

people are inherently violent or dangerous a growing body of literature deftly and sensitively explores the connection between endemic socio-economic marginalisation and the choices of young people to engage in violent or criminal behaviour (for example see, Scheper-Hughes 2004; Jutersonke, Muggah and Rogers 2009; Maclure and Sotelo 2004; McIllwaine and Moser 2007). Sometimes, however, the peaceable potential of children is seen as something natural, and rhetoric of building peace with children can become caught in the dominant discourse of childhood which sees children as sites of embodied futurity, replete with positive potential for change (Jenks 2005; James and Prout 2008). Such discourses prevent meaningful exploration of the ways young people actually conceive of and engage with notions of peace in their current everyday lives as actual beings, not just potential becomings.

Kent and Barnett (2012: 3) conceptualise a notion of peace not simply as an opposite to, or an absence of violence but as having collaborative and constructive practices of its own. Kent and Barnett's conceptualisation explores the structures that allow collective, contributory efforts towards peace, and the way young people participate in them. Such an argument is based in Galtung's work in which peace requires the absence of both structural violence and direct violence (1990, 1996), but argues for deeper interrogation of the ways in which individuals contribute to structures that build peace.

In an environment such as Cazucá the occupants are simultaneously excluded from broader engagement with civil society and frustrated in articulations of their rights, and suffer from the effects of violence and the stigmatising consequences of that violence. Lederach (1995) argues that the process of conflict transformation must encourage a "new set of lenses" through which the setting and people within it are not 'seen' as the 'problem' while the outsider has the 'answer'. Rather, he argues, "we understand the long-term goal of transformation as validating and building on people and resources within the setting" (1995: 212). Conceiving of conflict transformation as an active process of peacebuilding, and

recognising the requirement for input and direction from those who are most affected localises efforts to respond to violence and recognises small, everyday encounters, actions and experiences. Conflict transformation therefore relies strongly on localised practices of 'conflict transformation' (Lederach 1995; Galtung 1996). In complex conflict-affected environments, attention to the forms and places of participation is key in conceptualising the ways individuals respond to institutional marginalisation and find forms of resistance in everyday practices.

It follows that recognising the potential of transforming conflict and violence at a local level requires the contribution of *all* occupants of a community. While children are often dismissed from the realms of political and social life as unable to fully participate, a critical reading of Lederach and Galtung invites the serious consideration of what "validating and building on people and resources" (Lederach, 1995: 212) might mean for young people's participation. Wall and Dar argue that children's political representation can be seen as their "right to make a difference" in a way that recognises their relative structural powerlessness but which insists that difference should not just "deconstruct power but reconstruct it more inclusively" (2011: 606; see also Wall 2008). While Wall and Dar are speaking of formal political participation, the argument they make is relevant to thinking about everyday peacebuilding practices and the recognition of children's experiences of sites and structures that enable their participation.

As Kent and Barnett (2012) argue, to counter the dichotomising narratives around children and peacebuilding is complex and difficult, and requires recognition of the challenges so creative responses can be encouraged and sustained. Assumptions and narratives both about young people and about violence re-inscribe violence, as well as make non-violent responses more difficult. Yet it is important to recognise that efforts to build peace and foster resilience occur at local levels and involve all community members. This

discussion acknowledges that these complex relationships exist in a social fabric that is often frayed and fraught. It also centres young people's articulations of these difficulties and challenges so that it can also—following Kent and Barnett (2012)—centre their beliefs and engagements with spaces and efforts to build peace within their everyday lives.

Young People, Violence & Social Suffering

Complex and multifaceted expressions of violence are evident in the community of Cazucá and experiences of these multiple forms of violence are complex and have profound effects on the way young people negotiate their relationships and their environment. Acts of violence can reinforce each other and create a culture where violence is a legitimate form of expression and way to resolve issues; simultaneously it limits the possibility of other exchanges. Children who live in Cazucá have multiple examples and experiences of insecurity and violence; some of which originate in structural violence and abandonment by the state, and some which are direct violence against the bodies and property of young people and their families. This is evident in accounts, such as that of Javier (11) who when asked what makes Cazucá 'bad' answered that its due to the "many thieves and many people who kill lots of other people". Many children similarly cited the presence of thieves and physical violence. Other risks and insecurities that were mentioned included the absence of assistance from the police, vandalism and destruction of houses or property, the sale and consumption of drugs, the inability to move freely around the community because of risk of violence, the potential for sexual assault, as well as the threats and blackmail by the local gangs.

Complicating these experiences is the fact that young people affiliated with the gangs do carry out a great deal of the violence in the community and as a result young people are collectively stigmatised. Luz Milena (15) feels that many people see all children as complicit

in the violence performed by only a small group of young people in the community. In this, for Luz Milena, adults do not give young people a chance:

> They generalise about us a lot. That they think if, lets say, a youth attacks someone, that we are all the same and so then they don't truly look at the value that various young people here have. Well, the truth is I am one of them who wants to get ahead, who wants to make something of my life. And so it is hard with these generalizations…

The lure of violent responses to experiences of violence is a significant challenge for many young people. In situations like Cazucá, this cyclical nature of violence constitutes a fundamental obstacle to creating peace. In an interview with Natalia Martinez, from *Fundación Restrepo Barco*, a national NGO that works with vulnerable children and young people, she argued that this culture of violence is not solely experienced on a local level but is reinforced from the highest levels. Government policies, according to Natalia, means "solutions using weapons are strengthened everyday" and as a result the government has "strengthened this dialogue of conflict through weapons and not through peace" (in interview, October, 2010).

The young people of Cazucá live in an environment constantly affected by diverse forms of violence. Although this community experiences these multiple kinds of violence daily which form part of the fabric of their personal and collective narratives and lives, the young people included in this study also contest the daily violence they encounter. They find and articulate understandings of peace through everyday choices they make as well as the sites they inhabit (home, school, the *fundación*) and the relationships they build (family, friends).

School and the *Fundación* as 'Sites of Opportunity' for Children

Notions of everyday peace are located fundamentally in the routines and practices of the everyday that sustain interaction and participation. For children, school is foundational to everyday life. It can, at least for some students, function as a space where relationships are developed with peers and adults, and where the risk of violence is lessened. Smith (2010) notes that in situations where violent conflict exists, education can have a protective role through provision of routine and stability as well as a space to discuss the conflict. and strengthen resilience and capacity to cope with violence. Beyond the physical structure of educative spaces (schools, NGOs, community organisations) the content of discussions can also be significant. Alexander, Pinson and Yonah (2010) argue that educating around citizenship and rights can help contribute to peacebuilding (it is also important to note, however, that this kind of education can also reinforce problematic frames and understandings). Framing explorations of citizenship in terms of common rights and responsibilities provides young people with scaffolding to articulate their place in peace efforts as well as frustrations and aspirations (see Smith 2003). Psychological research on conflict-affected children in other parts of the world highlights similar conclusions. Bentancourt and Khan (2008: 323) note that schools provide a sense of predictability, but also can foster "enriched social networks…between children, staff and other adults in the community". Such findings echo the work of Villamizar and Zamora (2005) and Burgess (2008: 273-284) in Colombia. The focus on *convivencia* through formal programs and in everyday conversation also reinforces how the school can offer a space to discuss concepts such as rights and citizenship. These observations highlight the way in which sites such as the school and the *fundación* can function as focal points of resilience and support for children.

While the young people interviewed in this program all spoke positively of the school[11], it must be noted that educational institutions are not always seen as positive sites, but can be the location of combative encounters with authority, bullying, and violence, and negative encounters with the diffuse power of the state. Curriculum and class discussions can also serve to exacerbate or reinforce prejudices or underlying tensions associated with broader conflict (see Smith and Vaux 2003). However, these sentiments did not appear strongly evident in the community. The children involved in this research not only spoke about their experiences of violence and insecurity but also were keen and articulate in explaining their uses of the school and the *fundación*. In engaging with their narratives, this article recognises the importance of Kent and Barnett's argument that peace is collaborative and has causes of its own. This exploration also exemplifies the central contention of this article that children use and engage with particular programs or places that they perceive as sites of opportunity, and which allow them the space and support to explore ways of building peace. As Christian (16) noted, "its about finding a way, using what is available to make a difference to ourselves and our people".

The way in which young people engaged with different sites of opportunity and connected these encounters with broader issues in the community were evident during a day-long Human Rights Forum in October 2010 hosted by the school, with the support of the *fundación* and other community organisations, which I attended. It was a demonstration of many of the skills and experiences that had been taught at school and fostered through the various extra-curricular activities of the *fundación*. The central feature of the day was presentations by several of the senior students on different aspects of human rights. More

[11] This research was conducted through a school, and it is important to recognise there are children in the community who have opted out or were not afforded the opportunity to attend school (see, for example, Pinzon Ochoa (2007) for a discussion of youth gangs in the community of Cazucá). This does not invalidate the importance and usefulness of the school as a site of opportunity, but it does point to the need to think complexly about these issues, and recognise the different experiences of children in these environments.

interesting that the reiteration of basic human rights was the way these lessons were articulated in the context of the community. One student argued that human rights have to be a reality, that they have to be lived by everyone in the community. He recognised that the abuse of human rights is not a recent phenomenon but is complicated further in Cazucá where it is not only the violence of the conflict but the lack of food at home, the lack of running water in the school, and instances of domestic violence or assault in public places. For this young man these things were all linked:

> in our environment, where there is such violence, little children in our *comuna* grow up seeing violence and thinking: 'this is acceptable, this is how you solve problems (male student speaker, field notes, October 2010).

Places like the school, argued this student, and others throughout the day, can provide a way to realise this was not acceptable and to work collaboratively at resolving these problems and improving the opportunities for peaceful existence in the community. While the Human Rights Forum was a moment that explicitly drew together these different sites, children encountered and negotiated them in their more mundane forms everyday, and it is to these experiences that I now turn.

The School

The school in Cazucá is located in two clusters of buildings about fifteen minutes walk apart. Both are visible sites of security, each enclosed by either a wall or fence topped with barbed wire. Access to both sites is controlled through a locked gate, and the students know the rules of conduct they must follow while at school. This physical reading of the space translates to a sense for the children in Cazucá that the school was a site that offers potential, a space where young people can work collaboratively with peers and teachers, and also pursue individual accomplishments. In addition to classes on the expected subjects of maths, Spanish, science and so on, the students participate in classes on human rights and citizenship

values at different points through the school year. Both academic and social education is valued by the students and recognised formally in the school. Young people are aware and articulate about the effort required for achievement as indicated in this conversation between Paola (15), Alejandro (17) and Juliana (17):

> Paola: well, I think the education at this school is good; it depends on us if we do our part, if we want to learn or not. Because, well, I think that yes, more than anything it's up to us.
>
> Alejandro: Well yes education is good because if you want to learn you learn and those who don't well [trails off]. But for me, education is good, and I want to keep studying, and the school provides a space to follow that goal.
>
> Juliana: well, for me this education is very good, they teach us things
>
> Paola: [interrupts] interesting things
>
> Juliana: yes… and if you want to study you can study, but if not… well…
>
> *Researcher: And do you all want to keep studying?*
>
> All: Yes! Of course.

Evident in this exchange is acknowledgement of the difficulties that face young people who want to study, but equally the school and the education provided is seen as something that is 'good' and 'interesting' and as Alejandro notes, the school provides a "space to follow that goal". The efforts of adults to foster skill development as well as a facilitative space is recognised by young people. For children the fact that in the school environment violence was lessened and was actively discouraged and responded to by teachers was very important. The sense of the school as somewhere protected is evident also in this exchange with friends Rosa (15) and Camila Andrea (14):

> Rosa: I do like school. At times I didn't like it because before I was at another school where there were lots more fights than here... there isn't violence here like in the other place...I also like it because my classmates are very nice, and that teachers are helpful, and people don't pull out knives at school.
>
> [The girls talk over each other]

> Camila Andrea: I like school because you can learn lots of things, and also I've gotten to know friends. There isn't so much violence as with people outside school.

Rosa's understanding of her environment here is in comparison to a previous community she lived in where, as she mentioned several times during the discussion, her and her family were more affected by violence. This is not to imply that the school in Cazucá did not face issues of violence and fighting within the school but rather that Rosa's individual experiences were more positive here. The space of the school in this conversation is linked to the behaviour of the teachers, of other students, and of these girls in particular—it is the relationships that are built in the space that contributes to a sense of lessened violence and increased support.

Teachers also are aware of the significance of the school as a site of opportunity. This is captured well by Ana Martinez, a teacher at the school. For Ana Martinez there is a clear link between the provision of education and attendance at school, and the promotion and support of resilience in young people:

> At least during their time at school it helps create reflections for their life, for the construction of their world, and provides better opportunities in how to be human. To say "I can study more, I am a clever man, I can give more, each day I can learn something new, if I wanted I could leave this space and create a new space, I can improve my quality of life, not have ten kids like my mother, but only one that I can educate". It is these things that are at the centre of what we do in the school. But in a way that is real, that stays inside you. Not only to be written on a piece of paper, but that is lived and that they take within their chest and say "hey, I am going to take the middle road, because that road is sensible, and I won't be a parent at 15, and I won't have to go looking for food day-to-day for my child, but I am going to wait and give myself space to educate myself a little more, to have better stability, before starting a family". And so this is what we [as teachers] work on, that

> they internalize all those things and improve their quality of life (in interview, November 2010)

If there are issues, then the school and the *fundación* provide spaces in which young people can find ways of articulating a response. More than this, argues Ana Martinez, the school provides a space where children can reflect on their experiences and the experiences of their family and a space where they can imagine and begin to create a different future for themselves.

The Fundación

The *fundación* is based in a small house known as *la casita* in the community that contains a small office and several rooms at front that functioned as places for classes or activities. Children could also come after school or in other free time, as well as attend for organized events including homework assistance sessions, music programs and one-off activities. For several young people who were interviewed the *fundación* plays a large role in their lives, partly because of its links with the school, but also because these young people have actively sought out ways to involve themselves in its programs. One young man mentioned to me in passing that the employees and volunteers with the *fundación* "don't put up with bad behaviour" and as a result he and his friends behave so they can spend time at the *casita*. They appreciate it as a space where they "can not worry about other problems and people in their life for a small time" (field notes, September 2010). Paola (15) notes, "what the foundation does is good"; more specifically she recognised that:

> the activities of the foundation and that, is good for us, for us young people, if we want to grow and move ahead. It is very good.

The potential of these structures of opportunity can also be seen in young people's accounts that posit the benefits of the school or *fundación*, against the violence of broader life.

These spaces also provide a point of contact with the broader community. As discussed previously, in Cazucá the *fundación* and the school work together to encourage the involvement of parents and other occupants of the *barrio* through activities such as mothers' groups, information sessions, as well as facilitating communication in individual cases. The *fundación's* field coordinator in Cazucá, Ana Milena Ortega Gustin, offered an example of a kind of connection:

> what is interesting is that the parents can be involved…so if in the school there is a situation of violence, [what is interesting] is how the whole school is a part of that; from the teacher to the mother or father to the peers…. So then we can ask, together, how can we help this child improve? Obviously there are situations where it is very difficult to mediate or work, but the school can give that place sometimes. But it is this, this effort that the school makes on the topic of human rights, collectively, that for me is an interesting point (in interview, November 2010).

For Ana Milena there is an explicit connection between individual assistance and direction for a student, and the broader purpose of the school such as the effort to promote and educate around human rights. As she explained supporting the community includes the young people as well who are considered to be key actors in collective social engagement.

The Significance of Sites of Opportunity for Conflict-Affected Children

In many different ways these young people identified these spaces as *sites* of potential, where the physical place as well as the routine and maintenance of order help respond to the issues of violence that they face in other aspects of their life. Beyond this, these sites function as sites of opportunity by providing a space that helps ameliorate violence and provide support they allow those children who want to study or engage positively with opportunities the ability to do so. Significantly, these spaces do not cease being sites of institutional power over young people's lives, but they are simultaneously and intrinsically also sites where children have the opportunity to actively make choices and undertake actions. The claim

implicit in the above discussion is not that these children are radically subverting these sites, but rather learning how to actively use and critically engage with them within existing power dynamics. This kind of action is a profoundly everyday practice, locating the potential of children's actions for peace within local contexts.

While in Cazucá the school and *fundación* are institutions that provide physical space and routine for many of the young people who use them, not all young people necessarily have the same experience. Sites of opportunity for children are variable, while schools can be sites of opportunity for young people, they can also be fraught with similar conflicts and injustices of the environment they exist within and thus exacerbate young people's experiences of exclusion and insecurity. In addition, this article has focused on the school and *fundación* and as a result this account of both the lived experiences and the accounts of those experience by the children themselves is inevitably partial. Another important site of opportunity is family, who can provide a space where children feel secure and supported. Many young people identified the ways in which their families supported them and were crucial to their lives; especially in situations where they had lost family members or had been more recently displaced. It is true also, however, that for some young people family life is not a space of security but one of potential violence, of hunger and of precariousness. In this, it is evident that sites of opportunity are subjective, and while one child could have positive encounter with a space another could find it a site of exclusion or violence.

Also not directly addressed in this discussion is the way in which young people characterised their relationship with the powers and structures of the state; often pointing to practices of exclusion and stigmatisation and of corruption and violence (see Berents 2013: 122-128 for discussion on this aspect of children's narratives). These often sophisticated analyses were grounded against the reality and experiences of their everyday lives as well as broader political events in Colombia. This relationship is complicated as the young people

express frustration and distrust of the state and local authorities while simultaneously using the language of rights and citizenship to articulate how and why these structures should be providing them with services and support. While recognising these caveats it is also true that the school and *fundación* were most frequently identified as potential sites of opportunity and support by young people.

What is important to recognise, and what is often overlooked is the accounts of young people themselves. Broad structural programs and institutions often obfuscate the textures of the everyday. While there are a variety of programs implemented in the school or through the *fundación* for these young people, they note that these are only useful for those who want to "make something of themselves" or "get ahead" as one participant noted. Frequently citing the focus on respect for human rights and emphasis on *convivencia* by the school, children would explain how they use these skills to combat the insecurity and marginalisation of their everyday lives. Notions of citizenship and human rights provide the tools for young people to articulate their desire for more peaceful existence which begins in the everyday routines of their lives, and which is fostered and supported through structures of opportunity such as the school and the *fundación*. The violence and insecurities of the community are not expunged but ameliorated and young people themselves are competent and articulate about their preferred forms of engagement and desires for the future.

Young people living in Cazucá face profound challenges of poverty, persistent social exclusion and the consequences of multiple forms of violence in their everyday lives. Yet these experiences are not totalising, nor do they mean that all young people are damaged or inherently violent. Rather, young people can identify and articulate these challenges and use the skills taught and fostered in spaces such as the school or the *fundación* to respond to and navigate these risks. The efforts to affect change, located in everyday practices, and supported through physical sites that assist in the abeyance of violence, allow the potential of

young people's daily routines to contribute to positive notions of the future, and to constructively locate themselves within those imaginings. The resilience and skills that are fostered by locations such as the school and *fundación* strengthen the ability of children's contributions to be recognised in building everyday notions of peace amidst multiple forms of violence. Beyond the recognition that young people are active meaning makers within their everyday lives, and within their communities, there is also a crucial need to provide responsive and supportive structures for young people to be able to engage with not only their daily lives, but the broader socio-political environment of which they are part.

The ongoing peace talks between the Colombian government and the FARC have sparked new discussions of peace in broader Colombian society. Peacebuilding does not only occur at elite levels, and while children may be absent from the high level discussions and regional panels their presence within everyday life requires those taking ideas of peace seriously to ask how existing structures can be accessed and used by young people. As demonstrated in this study, when provided with sites of opportunity, children can contribute in meaningful ways to fostering everyday peace practices through. This emphasises the significance of Lederach's (1995) argument that see the process of conflict transformation as requiring the use of all resources within a given setting.

Of course while localised, small-scale sites such as the school or the *fundación* in Cazucá, or *Escuela Nueva* more broadly across the country, can facilitate change and support young people and their communities, change also requires broader structural changes across all aspects of economic, social, and political life. Such change could resonate and even draw from community level discourse. Without structural changes local level efforts can be either circumscribed or entirely frustrated; but neither can the structures function without an acknowledgement of how they are embedded in the local. It is for this reason that the

conversation around the peace process and other questions of impunity, inequality, and exclusion must take place in multiple ways and at multiple levels.

In addition, the capacities and interests of children, especially those who participate in programs that support their civic engagement, demonstrate their competence. Young people have a fundamental right to participate in the processes of peacebuilding in their everyday lives. Ana Martinez (the previously mentioned teacher) argues that it is a collective responsibility of adults to think about the spaces and opportunities that young people have. She argues that the possibility for young people to grow in a way that will challenge the violence that "has steered us for many centuries in Colombia" is the most important aim, and yet in her opinion children are still lacking many opportunities, which is a collective failure and a collective obligation:

> We still are lacking in the opportunities we give to children … but we have to ask the governments what they are going to do… but also as humans, as teachers [what are we going to do] to improve this? (in interview, November, 2010)

In another conversation with Ana Martinez we discussed the need for more resources and more time in classes as well as more teachers, but she noted that the government needs to help and at present there is very little money or support for these things. I noted that in my conversations the children are very aware of the lack of resources, the corruption of the government, that things do not arrive, and Ana Martinez agreed: "they are very aware of this", and noted that this affects the way they perceive their place in society also.

This cautionary note does not lessen the significance of spaces in everyday life where children's participation is supported or encouraged. Such spaces exist in tension with spaces in which actions are violent or transgressive. Locations where violence is lessened also provide sites of possibility and opportunity. As a result the challenges of violence and

insecurity can be negotiated, redefined and managed. While these spaces are not inviolable they can provide space where routines can be established and practiced; these sites produce and afford an everyday by fostering routine. Rather than a dichotomisation of violence and peace or a reductive accounting of peace, the idea of an everyday peace draws upon demonstrable evidence that the young people of Cazucá establish and maintain normality and routine in the presence of persistent violence. It is crucial to recognise that while insecurity may loom large in accounts of the community, these narratives of violence are not totalising.

The violence in Cazucá, and places like Cazucá that are deeply affected by the conflict, has a profound affect on children who are both deeply affected by it, but are also at a crucial juncture of experience to be able to participate in change-making and peacebuilding practices. Beyond individual, localised recognition, there is a need for a balance between personal experiences and the broader network of relationships "such that one's voice carries and one's actions have repercussions in the state, nation, or community with which one identifies" (Jackson 2002: 40). For the young occupants of Cazucá, while their voices might rarely have repercussions at the state level, they can and do make changes and foster an everyday peace in the local community.

References Cited

'Acuerdo General para la terminación del conflicto y la construcción de una paz estable y durada' signed by representatives of the Government of Colombia and the FARC-EP, August 24, 2012. http://www.eltiempo.com/politica/ARCHIVO/ARCHIVO-12193994-0.pdf

Alcaldia Municipial de Soacha. *Plan de Desarrollo 2008-2011: "Soacha para vivir mejor"*. (Soacha, Colombia: Alcaldia Municipial de Soacha, 2008).

Alexander, H, H Pinson, & Y Yonah. *Citizenship, Education and Social Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2010).

Alzate, MM., 'The sexual and reproductive rights of internally displaced women: the embodiment of Colombia's crisis'. *Disasters* 32 (2007): 131-148.

Bentancourt, TS & Khan KT., 'The mental health of children affected by armed conflict: Protective processes and pathways to resilience'. *International Review of Psychiatry* 20 (2008): 317-328.

Berents, H. (2013) From the Margins: Conflict-Affected Young People, Social Exclusion, and an Embodied Everyday Peace in Colombia. PhD diss., International Relations, University of Queensland, Brisbane.

Bouvier, V.M., ed. *Colombia: Building Peace in a Time of War*. (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2009).

Burgess, R. (2008) Formal and Nonformal Education: Impacting the Psychosocial Well-being of Displaced, Violence-affected Children in Colombia. PhD diss., Teachers College, Columbia University, New York.

Bushnell, D., *The Making of Modern Colombia: A Nation in Spite of Itself*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

Chaux, E., 'Citizenship Competencies in the Midst of a Violent Political Conflict: The Colombian Educational Response', *Harvard Educational Review* 79 (2009): 84-93.

Chaux, E, Lleras, J & Velásquez, AM., *Competencias ciudadanas: De los estándares al aula, una propuesta de integración a las áreas académicas*. (Bogotá: Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2004).

Chaux, E & Velasquez, AM., ‘Peace Education in Colombia: The Promise of Citizenship Competencies’. In *Colombia: Building Peace in a Time of War*. ed. VM. Bouvier (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2009).

COALICO (Coalición Contra la Vinculación de Niños Niñas y Jóvenes al Conflicto Armado en Colombia). *Alternative Report to the Report of the government of Colombia to the United Nations on the situation of the rights of the child in Colombia*. (Bogotá: COALICO, 2005).

CODHES (Consultoria para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento). *Número de personas desplazadas por Departamento de Llegada*. (Bogotá, Colombia: CODHES, 2010).

CODHES (Consultoria para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento).*Desplazamiento Forzado Intraurbano y Soluciones Duraderas.* (Bogotá, Colombia: CODHES, 2013)

Colombia Reports. "Colombia implements free primary and secondary education.", February 02, 2012. http://colombiareports.com/colombia-news/news/21955-colombia-implements-free-primary-and-secondary-education.html.

Corte Constitucional de Colombia. ‘Auto No 251 de 2008’. Corte Constitucional: Sala Segunda de Revisión,. Bogotá: Republica de Colombia (2008).

El Espectador. "Educación pública gratis a partir de 2012 ". December 01, 2011. http://www.elespectador.com/impreso/vivir/articulo-314537-educacion-publica-gratis-partir-de-2012.

El Tiempo. "Gobierno Revisará Cifras Sobre Reclutamineto Forzado De Niños." August 15, 2012. http://www.eltiempo.com/vida-de-hoy/educacion/gobierno-revisara-cifras-sobre-reclutamiento-forzado-de-ninos-_12131989-4

Fine, G. A. & Sandstrom. K. L., *Knowing children: participant observation with minors*. (Newbury Park, California: SAGE Publications, 1988).

Forero, C, Escobar, D & Molina D., Escuela Nueva's Impact on the Peaceful Social Interaction of Children. In *Education for All and Multigrade Teaching: Challenges and Opportunities.* ed. AW. Little (Amsterdam: Springer, 2006).

Fundación Pies Descalzos. *Performance Report (English).* (Bogotá: Fundación Pies Descalzos, 2011a).

Fundación Pies Descalzos, 'Proyectos: Los Altos de Cazucá.' (2011b), at http://www.fundacionpiesdescalzos.com/es/programas/los-colegios/altos-de-Cazucá.html.

Galtung, J., 'Structural Violence'. *Journal of Peace Research* 27 (1990): 291-305.

Galtung, J., *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization.* (London: SAGE, 1996).

Guerrero, AL., (2008) Internally Displaced Children Constructing Identities within and against Cultural Worlds: The case of "Shooting Cameras for Peace" in Colombia. PhD diss., School of Education, University of California, Santa Barbara.

Human Rights Watch., *Colombia: Displaced and Discarded: The Plight of Internally Displaced Persons in Bogotá and Cartagena.* (New York, Human Right Watch, 2005).

Jackson, M., *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression and Intersubjectivity*. (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2002).

James, A. & Prout A., *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*. (Basingstoke: Falmer Press, 1990).

Jenks, C., *Childhood (2nd edition).* (London: Routledge, 2005).

Jutersonke, O., Muggah, R. & Rogers D., 'Gangs, urban violence, and security interventions in Central America'. *Security Dialogue* 40 (2009): 373-397.

Kent, S. & Barnett, J., Localising peace: The young men of Bougainville's 'Crisis generation'. *Political Geography*. 31(1) (2012): 34-43.

Lederach, JP., *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures*. (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995).

Maclure, R. & Sotelo, M. 'Youth gangs in Nicaragua: gang membership as structured individualization'. *Journal of Youth Studies* 7 (2004): 417-432.

McEwan, P., 'The Effectiveness of Multi-grade Schools in Colombia'. *International Journal of Educational Development* 18 (1998): 435-452.

McIlwaine, C. & Moser, C.O.N., 'Living in fear: how the urban poor perceive violence, fear and insecurity'. In *Fractured cities: social exclusion, urban violence and contested spaces in Latin America.* eds. Koonings, K. & Kruijt, D. (London: Zed Books, 2007).

Medicos Sin Fronteras (MSF), *Altos de Cazucá: Hasta cuando en el olvido*. (Bogotá: MSF, 2005).

Meertens, D., 'Forced displacement and women's security in Colombia'. *Disasters* 34 (2010): S147-S164.

Meertens, D. & Zambrano, M., 'Citizenship Deferred: The Politics of Victimhood, Land Restitution and Gender Justice in the Colombian (Post?) Conflict'. *The International Journal of Transitional Justice* 4 (2010): 189-206.

Miall, H., 'Conflict Transformation: A Multi-Dimensional Task'. In *Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation*. (2004). http://www.berghof-handbook.net/.

Moser, C.O.N., *The Social Costs of Conflict and Local Peace Initiatives in Colombia.* (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2005)

Palacios, M., *Between Legitimacy and Violence: A History of Colombia 1875-2002*. trans. Stoller, R. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

Pinzon Ochoa, N. M., 'Los Jovenes De 'La Loma': Altos De Cazucá Y El Paramilitarismo En La Periferia De Bogotá.' *Maguare* 21 (2007): 271-95.

Ramos, C., Nieto, A. & Chaux, E., 'Aulas en Paz: Resultados Preliminares de un Programa Multi-Componente'. *Interamerican Journal of Education for Democracy* 1(1) (2007): 36-56.

Richani, N., *Systems of Violence: The Political Economy of War and Peace in Colombia*. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002).

Richmond, O., 'A Post-Liberal Peace: Eirenism and the Everyday.' *Review of International Studies* 35(3) (2009): 557-80.

Richmond, O., *A Post-Liberal Peace*. (London: Routledge, 2011).

Scheper-Hughes, N., 'Dangerous and Endangered Youth: Social Structures and Determinants of Violence'. *Annals New York Academy of Sciences* 1036 (2004): 13-46.

Smith, A., 'The influence of education on conflict and peace building'. *Paper commissioned for the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2011: "The hidden crisis: Armed conflict and education".* (EFA and UNESCO, 2010).

Smith, A., & Vaux, T., E*ducation, conflict, and international development.* (London: Department of International Development, 2003).

United Nations. Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Colombia. (New York: United Nations, 2012).

UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees). *2012 UNHCR country operations profile - Colombia*. (2012). http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e492ad6.html.

Wall, J., 'Human rights in light of childhood'. *International Journal of Children's Rights*. 16 (4) (2008): 523-543.

Wall, J., & Dar, A., 'Children's Political Representation: The Right to Make a Difference'. *International Journal of Children's Rights*. 19 (2011): 595-612.

Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict. *No One to Trust: Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia*. (New York: Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, 2012).

Villamizar Rojas, R., & Zamora Vasquez, S., 'Vivir juvenil en medios de conflictos urbanos: una aproximacion en la zona colindante entre Bogotá y Soacha'. In *Jovenes, Conflictos Urbanos y Alternativas de Inclusion.* ed. V. Sabogal Ruiz (Bogotá, Colombia: Plataforma Conflicto Urbano y Jovenes, CIVIS Suecia & ASDI, 2005).